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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role that geography plays in the enhanced comprehension of some literature. One way to demonstrate the value and utility of geography is to show how geographers can contribute to other fields and the interrelationships with other disciplines. Many novelists have used geographical concepts to good advantage. Examples include James Michener, William Faulkner, Phillip and Juilana Muehreke, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and John Steinbeck. Nevil Shute's "The Legacy" illustrates a number of geographic concepts such as industrial location, threshold values, take off points, and the multiplier effects. If writers have incorporated geographic materials into their works, the reverse is also true. There is considerable precedent for the use of literary works by geographers. For example, the geographer William Rabiega prepared a bibliography on the use of science fiction as an indicator of possible future conditions as they relate to the environment. A recent survey of teaching techniques utilized in courses on Latin American politics shows that over 40% of the respondents utilized works of fiction as a pedagogic device, and all instructors who used fictional materials reported that they were effective. The two concepts that tie geography and literature together are unity and reality. (Author/RM)

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GEOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE: UNITY AND REALITY

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In the last several years a number of articles have appeared that illustrate the use of literary works, basically novels, to the improved understanding of geography. This paper continues this trend and further suggests that geography has a role to play in enhanced comprehension of some literature--that a geographic framework is essential.

A Geographical Framework for Literature

The noted novelist and former social studies teacher James A. Michener wrote glowingly on the value of geography to his work.[1] He suggested that his novels enjoy success in part because their themes are firmly fixed within a specific regional context. In doing background research, Michener stated that he first reads geography books on the region, although in his opinion, "Most geography books ... are drab affairs ... However, even the poorest regional geography is better than none at all; it at least delimits the field, fixes certain relationships, and drives the reader to contemplation of his own."[2] Michener's use of geographic concepts such as sequent occupance and man-land relationships is particularly evident in works such as Hawaii, The Source, Centennial, and Cheasapeake.

In a slightly different view Charles Aiken has shown that William Faulkner set his novels firmly within a geographic context.[3] Faulkner fictionalized Lafayette County, Mississippi, and its county seat, Oxford, into Yoknapatawpha County with Jefferson as the county seat. Not only did Faulkner explore the spatial interrelationships between groups of people but he also noted significant areal variations in the environment. For

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example, he clearly placed Yoknapatawpha's plantation inhabitants within the loess plains and the poor whites in the Pine Hills. As one of Faulkner's biographers noted, geography is "scrupulously though effortlessly presented in Faulkner's work."[4] In fact, so important is geography to Faulkner's novels that much of the author's flavor would be lost without it. As Aiken points out, Faulkner made Yoknapatawpha County so real "that to many readers it seems to be an actual county."[5]

Many other novelists have used geographical concepts to good advantage. Phillip and Juilana Muehrcke have shown that maps are often fundamental to plot development.[6] They noted: "Writers may be especially attracted to maps because they are so well acquainted with the limitations of written communications in dealing with form, processes, and relationships in the space-time continuum."[7] It would be difficult indeed to follow J.R.R. Tolkien's Hobbit Bilbo through the Middle Earth of the Lord of the Rings or Robert Lewis Stevenson's young Jim in his adventures in Treasure Island without the authors' maps to serve as guides.

Douglas McManis has illustrated the use of geography by mystery writers such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers.[8] He notes that the role of geography may be passive or active. A passive geography is simply where place and its characteristics serve as background. An active geography is where the characteristics of place are incorporated within the story, and an understanding of locale characteristic is a necessary element in plot construction. Many of the "western" writers such as Zane Grey and Max Brand integrate physical geography in their story plot in an active manner.

In fact many novels use geography, real or imagined, as the stage upon which the writer moves his characters and which influence, in varying degree, the story line. As already noted, much of Faulkner's and Michener's success

is due to geographical context and consistency. They are not alone for many other distinguished authors have employed geography. John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath is a classic example of a novel that dramatically depicts a significant geographic event: the migration of thousands of displaced farmers fleeing the effects of depression, drought, and technological change in the Dust Bowl.[9]

Nevil Shute's (pseudonym) The Legacy (also entitled A Town Like Alice) illustrates a number of geographic concepts such as industrial location, threshold values, take-off points, and the multiplier effect. The multiplier effect is graphically demonstrated in the small dying outback Australian town of Willstown which was transformed into a bustling growing center with the luck, initiative, and financing of one woman (Jean Paget). Paget began with a small workshop employing young women to make shoes, cases, and bags out of hides. She expanded into service activities and then other individuals began to open and expand their economic activities. Here is partly how Shute explained the multiplier effect: "How big is the town now?"

"There's about four hundred and fifty people living in Willstown," he said. "That's not counting boongs, and not counting people living out upon the stations. The population's tripled in the last three years."

"Is that just because of the workshop?" I asked.

He said slowly, "I think it must be--everything comes back to that, when you look at it. It's not only the workshop, you see. She's got two girls employed in the ice cream parlour, and one lubra. Two in the beauty parlour, three in the dress shop, two in the fruit shop, three in the cinema. She employs quite a lot of people."

I was puzzled. "But can twenty girls in the workshop provide work for all these other girls?" I asked.

"It doesn't seem to work that way," he said. "We were totting it up the other day. She's never employed more than about thirty-five girls at any one time, but since she started there's been forty-two girls married out of her businesses. They mostly marry ringers. Well, that's forty-two families starting, forty-two women wanting cinema and beauty parlour and fresh vegetables and that, beside the thirty-five girls that she's still got employed. It kind of snowballs." He paused. "Take the bank. There's two girl clerks there that there never were before, because of the bigger business. The A.M.P. have started up an office, and there's a girl in that. Bill Wakeling's got a girl in his office." He turned to me. "It's a fact, there's something like a hundred girls and married women under twenty-five in Willstown now," he said. "When Jean came, there was two."

"And the babies!" he said. "There's more babies than you could shake a stick at. They've had to send a special maternity nurse to the hospital. That's another girl. She got engaged to Phil Duncan, the copper, last month, so there'll be another one."

I smiled. "Are there enough men to go round?"

"On my word," he said. "There's no difficulty in getting men to work in Willstown. I've had ringers coming from all over Queensland, from the Northern Territory, too, wanting a job round about Willstown. There was one chap came all the way from Marble Bar in Western Australia, two thousand miles or so. The labour situation's very different now to what it was three years ago."[10]

A novel based almost entirely on geographic concepts is Storm by George R. Stewart. Stewart tracks a mid-latitude storm from its beginnings along the Japanese coast through its development as a major storm to its dissipation over the western United States. Throughout the novel the storm

is the principal character and its diverse impact upon human activities and nature is vividly detailed. Although forty years old Storm has lost none of its force.

On a more recent note Allan Eckert's The HAB Theory draws heavily on Charles Hapgood's analysis of the Piri Reis map. Eckert builds an elaborate plot based primarily on a geographer's set of hypotheses.[12]

A Literary Framework for Geography

If writers have incorporated geographic materials into their works, the reverse is also true; there is considerable precedent for the use of literary works by geographers and other academics. The geographer David Lowenthal has frequently employed passages from literary works to convey ideas and examplify his points regarding the perceptions of landscape and attitudes toward places that characterize particular areas at specific times in their history.[13] William Rabiega, another geographer, prepared a bibliography on the use of science fiction as an indicator of possible future conditions as they relate to the environment, and Anthony White, an urban planner, compiled a similar list of selected works of science fiction useful in exploring possible future trends and conditions of urban life.[14]

Recently Colin Gunn reported on a world geography course based primarily on the use of non-Western literary works. He noted a very favorable reaction from his students and considered the project to have been successful.[15] Henry C. Kenski, a political scientist, found in a recent survey of teaching techniques utilized in courses on Latin American politics that over 40 percent of the respondents utilized works of fiction as a pedagogic device, and all instructors who used fictional materials reported that they were effective.[16] Furthermore, Kenski noted that 76 percent of those teaching African politics and 39 percent of the instructors of courses on political

development used works of fiction in their teaching. Similarly, Truitt expressed enthusiasm over the use of novels and memoirs in teaching international business courses. He feels such literature gives a dimension of realism not found in academic writing. In geography a final indication of the growing interest in the use of literary works comes from the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers where in 1974 an entire session was devoted to the theme of "Landscape in Literature."[17]

Unity and Reality

Two concepts tie geography and literature together: unity and reality. Unity--the idea that the world and its parts are combined in a functioning, although imperfectly understood, active system--is basic to many disciplines, including geography. Geographic unity can be viewed from at least two perspectives. First, geographers subscribe to the principle that phenomena are distributed and interrelated in a consistent and rational manner. This facet of unity is well known to us and needs no further elaboration. Second, geography can serve as a unifying vehicle among various fields. Again the link between geography and history and other social sciences is well documented. So too is the tie with numerous physical sciences. What is somewhat less clear is the linkage with literature, the arts, and numanities. A study of these fields can assist in improving a student's understanding of geography, and a study of geography can help in understanding literature, the arts, and humanities. Jane Zaring, for example, dramatically showed how the arts can contribute to geographic understanding.[18] Her study comparing the shared perceptions of Wales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the evidence found in agricultural surveys is not only a valuable document of historical geography but is also a fine example of the utility and dangers of using artists' and writers' descriptions.

In literature the concept of unity is one of the three principles of plot development. The aspects of unity normally used are: unity of time, unity of action, and unity of place. It is unity of place or setting that relates most directly to geography: the principle that phenomena are distributed and interrelated in a consistant and rational manner. As Gary Elbow and Tom Martinson stated in their article "Science Fiction for Geographers: Selected Works," "Even in the imaginary world, one must recognize certain natural balances and apply limits to change."[19] A. J. Lamme III noted that Michener's Hawaii and Centennial are rooted in the traditional geographic concepts of man-land relationship--a system of landscape organization.[20] It would seem appropriate not only to use literature as an aid to geographic studies but also to point out geographic principles and processes in literature classes. Certainly the use of a geographic perspective would provide an added dimension to the examination of many works already cited as well as many classics such as The Odyssey and Shakespeare's plays.

A few years ago Gary Elbow and I wrote an article on the use of literary works in teaching Latin American geography.[21] If that paper had any merit it was in the list of suggested readings. For a reading to be selected it had to be entertaining and have some geographic value. What we did not say and what, in fact, did not occur to us was that all reading selected were excellent descriptions of reality. Many novelists provide useful insights into the real world that geographers can use. Faulkner, Michener, and Steinbeck provide many excellent examples of real world conditions. So too does James Clavell in his works such as Shogun on eastern Asia, Colleen McCullough with her Thornbirds, a novel on Australia, and Peter Matthiessen's Far Tortuga which provides a description of turtle fishing along the Miskito Coast. Many other literary works could also be cited. We as geographers

can contribute to the study of literature by helping to explain real world situations and literature can help us comprehend reality. John Morris in his article "An Age of Reality" made an eloquent call for geographers to demonstrate their subject's value.[22] He pleaded for an awareness of unity of the earth, a realization of the real world, and the importance of geography in the recognition of unity, interdependence, and real world situations.

Geography's position in the curriculum of schools and colleges has fluctuated greatly. Its position, along with many other subjects, will probably continue to be assessed and modified in the light of changes in educational philosophies and influences beyond our control. We must demonstrate continuously the value and utility of geography. One way is to show how we can contribute to other fields and the interrelationships with other disciplines.

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